

The Lady

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**KIDNAPPED
BY MY
MOTHER**

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A narrow Venetian canal with a gondola in the foreground and colorful buildings on either side. The water is dark and reflects the surrounding architecture. The buildings are multi-story, with various window styles and colors like yellow, red, and grey. A small bridge is visible in the distance. The overall atmosphere is quiet and historic.

VENICE

but not as you know it...

Think Venice is sinking under the tourist hordes? Think again, says Ivo Dawnay. Just give the crowds the slip, and take the canal less travelled

MY TOP TRAVEL TIP for would-be Venice-goers is: 'Remember to bring your passport'. My smugness at arriving at the check-in desk with a good hour-and-a-half to spare deflated like a soufflé when I found the document I had just handed over to BA was my son's.

So my itinerary to the fairyland of La Serenissima was an unusual one, involving three trips on the Gatwick Express, a London taxi round-trip home from Victoria and back (£45) and a late flight to Bologna – followed by an early-hours search for Pensione Bolognese during a surgeons' convention.

Almost 24-hours later, my train and I finally rattled across the causeway to Santa Lucia station (a latter-day Odysseus) with hand luggage, more than ready to sink back into the timeless, dreamy unreality of a medieval city built on stilts in a lagoon.

My wife (a Penelope with one Cipriani dinner already under her belt) greeted me with our host in a rubber dingy with an outboard motor and we chugged, slowly and illegally, up the Grand Canal to St Mark's under a Canaletto-blue sky. It was as if, after 50-odd years' exile in the Trojan wars of real life, one had at last returned home. For, however often one goes, one forgets the preposterous perfection of the journey: a sensual smorgasbord that leaves one smiling involuntarily with joy.

The slap of water against the bow, the smutty banter of the delivery bargemen, the food smells from the Rialto market, the startling Gothic whiteness of the Ca' d'Oro, the mysterious, shadowy darkness of the side alleys, the red-and-white striped mooring poles like barbers' signs and even the traffic-like murmur of the ubiquitous tourists, all jostle for one's attention.

We arrived at our destination in an exhausted reverie. Presumably it was always thus. And a big part of the delight of any Venice visit is the knowledge that one is seeing the city now almost exactly as it would have been seen by Byron and Browning and the tens of thousands of fellow Grand Tourists of centuries ago. Where else can that be true?

Our hosts – Giorgio and Ilaria Miani – are actually Romans with a passion for saving, restoring and making habitable any building that combines crumbling antiquity with character. So our first visit was to the tiny Isola San Pietro, the island abutting the Arsenale at the far eastern

end of the city. There they have bought a charming canalside house in one of the most tranquil corners of the crowded Cannaregio District. Inside, builders chipped away at the moulting plaster and after an inspection that unleashed all one's acquisitive juices, it was time for lunch.

And what a lunch. My past experience of Venice restaurants has invariably been disappointing. But now, in the hands of insiders, we are led to an impossible-to-find back alley, through an anonymous

destinations, pre-plotted on maps. Familiar with the grand sites, we sought out new ones – the Ca' Rezzonico, the Veronese frescos at the church of San Sebastiano, the Piranesi exhibition on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore and the hidden-away Scuola di Schiavoni, with its stunning Carpaccio frescos.

The secret, we learned, of enjoying Venice was a large-scale map and a policy of dodging the main tourist routes. Keeping to the back canals, one could stumble across miracles of art – like the Tintoretto-bedecked Scuola di San Rocco – and miracles of taste, like the tiny enoteca wine bars, with their bite-sized salami rolls.

There seemed so much to do that even after nearly four days of intensive sight-seeing and Rabelaisian eating, we had still failed to make the half-hour trip to the outer islands of Burano and Torcello, and my paintbox, lugged, heavy as lead, across the transit lounges and railway stations of northern Italy, still had not been opened.

Would one actually want to live here? For the first 24 hours of any visit, the British, property-obsessed tourist can hardly resist browsing the windows of estate agents (and gasping at the prices). But after three days, it is clear that permanent residence is neither plausible nor the point. Venice's unique selling point is its unreality.

Too much beauty, too much self-indulgence leaves one gluttoned. The secret is to leave enough Venetian magic unexplored to justify another visit a few years hence.



'The secret of enjoying Venice was a large-scale map and dodging the main tourist routes'

doorway and into a stunning courtyard where we are served black spaghetti, razor clams and spider crabs.

Ready for our siesta, we headed off to Giudecca to the Mianis' delightful high-tech apartment, nestled – lest we felt peckish – next to another top restaurant, a favourite of President Mitterrand. Across the main shipping lane from the docks, a quarter mile of water separates the Giudecca from the tourist maelstrom of the main Venice islands. Vaporetto water buses chug regularly between the two, allowing Giudecca-ites both proximity and the tranquillity so elusive to most Venice visits.

Luxuriously ensconced, for the next three days we sallied forth for expeditions into the city: our cultural and culinary

But be sure to take the water taxi back to the airport and watch the domes and campanile slowly sink across the muddy marshes of the lagoon back into the far horizon, against a melancholy grey sky.

You are Odysseus fated to leave Ithaca once more and to set sail for exile and the hideous 21st-century horrors of Gatwick's North Terminal. Already it is only a half-remembered dream – and Penelope has lost the house keys. ♦

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